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SUBJECT: KARIMOV'S INDEPENDENCE DAY SPEECHES: PLATITUDES,
PROMISES, AND WARNINGS

Classified By: CDA Brad Hanson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: During his two-hour televised speech to the Cabinet on August 30, President Karimov touted Uzbekistan's accomplishments since independence and pledged greater successes in the future, but warned that "foreign centers" were trying to undermine the country. His Independence Day address to the people also extolled Uzbekistan's reforms and called for the pursuit of a series of goals including economic growth, further political and economic changes, and vigilance against threats to the country. Karimov continues to keep his cards close to his chest on the presidential election, but his speeches may be intended to win public support ahead of the election. His remarks also reflect a continuing suspicion of foreign influence, and coverage of Independence Day in the state-run newspaper Narodnoe Slovo suggests that the GOU puts Russia, China, and the United Nations ahead of the United States in its foreign policy hierarchy. Despite Karimov's rhetoric on reform, we are skeptical of the GOU's commitment to carry through on them. End summary.

12. (U) Karimov's initial remarks to the Cabinet focused on the dangers of instability the collapse of the Soviet Union caused and that urgent measures had to be taken to protect the country. Karimov then praised Uzbekistan's accomplishments across a range of issues including the energy sector, industry, infrastructure, agriculture, and military reform. The Cabinet greeted these comments periodically with applause.

13. (C) Switching gears, Karimov launched into a tirade against the dangers of foreign influence. He warned that "foreign centers" were exploiting Uzbekistan's ideological vacuum and spending vast resources to work against the country, and this was "disastrous." Karimov noted his shame that certain media could be accessed, specifically citing certain Russian channels, but noted that Uzbekistan could not shut down the media. He stated that parliamentary elections will be held in 2009 and that increasing political and legal awareness of the people was important. Karimov then rattled off economic statistics, claiming that GDP had increased by 30 percent since 1990 and that real incomes had increased by 2.5-fold between 2000 and 2006. He set a goal of increasing salaries 2-2.5-fold every three years, and pledged that salaries would increase 2.5 times by 2009. (Note: Karimov raises minimum wages about every six to nine months. End note.)

14. (U) During his Independence Day speech on August 31,

Karimov stressed that Uzbekistan had made great strides since its independence toward democracy, prosperity, and securing international respect. He called for the improvement of living standards, further political and economic reforms, vigilance against possible threats, more opportunities for young people, and safeguarding peace.

15. (C) The state-controlled newspaper Narodnoe Slovo listed Independence Day congratulatory letters from Russia, China, and the United Nations before that of the United States. (This ranking hints at Uzbekistani foreign policy priorities; prior to 2005, when the GOU was more favorably disposed toward the United States, statements from the President of the United States had been listed first.)

16. (C) Comment: Karimov remains discreet about plans for a presidential election, not mentioning this once during either speech. Nevertheless, Karimov may intend his remarks--which promise greater achievements and blatantly exaggerate Uzbekistan's successes while glossing over problems--to bolster his image ahead of the widely expected December presidential election. Karimov's Cabinet speech also illustrates his continuing suspicion of the West and a growing distrust of Russia. As usual, Karimov said the right things about political and economic liberalization, but we are deeply skeptical of his commitment toward their implementation.

HANSON